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ABSTRACT

The process of school review currently used in Victoria (Australia) involves an internal school evaluation, a School Review Board visit and report, and a followup stage. Six months after the board had visited one high school, a retrospective view of the review process was gathered from 8 students, 9 parents, 24 teachers, and 5 administrators. As a validity check, respondents then commented on the multiple perspectives represented. The administrative intervention was intended as a school improvement strategy; however, metaevaluation of the realities experienced by those reviewed suggests that the process was a ritual to maintain illusions of power at all levels. The review failed to facilitate the development of teaching, learning, administration, or governance. Only some of the people's attitudes changed, mostly in short-term, counter-productive ways. (MLF)

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# The 'I and We' of Accountability: An Example of Meta-Evaluation in Educational Administration

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ABSTRACT

Accountability in educational administration is examined as a term, as a process, and as values-in-action. An example of administrative intervention intended as school improvement strategy - a School Review in Victoria - is clarified by phenomenological description. Evaluation of 'real' outcomes implied the process to be professionally ineffective and partially fraudulent. Meta-evaluation suggested that the process was a ritual to maintain illusions of power at all levels. The need for appropriate processes and criteria for formative meta evaluation in educational administration is raised for consideration.

# THE 'I AND WE' OF ACCOUNTABILITY: AN EXAMPLE OF META EVALUATION IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

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## Introduction

In 1945 Einstein wrote to a friend thanking him for a present - Herman Broch's book 'Vergil' - in the following terms:

> 'I am fascinated by your 'Vergil' - and am steadfastly resisting him. The book shows me clearly what I fled from when I sold myself body and soul to Science - the flight from the I and We to the It'.

The purpose of this paper is to ask if educational administrators have fled from the 'I and We' of accountability, and sold themselves to seemingly scientific and objective processes when seeking to hold others to account. When, for example, Millikan (1980) examined the explicit values of the Green Paper (1980) he found that the term 'accountability' expressed economic concerns. He also concluded that 'accountability' as a process would be 'predominantly one-way, upwards <u>from</u> those to whom power and responsibility is devolved, <u>to</u> those who devolve ...' These and other examples suggest that educational administrators might tend to process quantifiable factors of resource allocation, rather than supplement the rationale of resource allocation with what Hodgkinson (1978:111) terms the conative values of educationalists.

Could it be that 'accountability' is an 'It' word with an elaborate set of largely symbolic meanings that serve to legitimize and sustain what people with power do to others?

To examine these sorts of questions implies an unorthodox stance for research into educational administration as action. Firstly it means setting-aside the perspectives embodied in the Deficient-Teacher model of

educational administration. Secondly it tacitly recognizes that educational administration is a field of study and practice somewhat bereft of philosophical clarity, with a notable disinclination by practitioners to clarify and openly state their aims and objectives. Thirdly it suggests that despite the range of groups to whom educational administrators might be held accountable, the pre-eminent criterion when evaluating their services, should address the impact they have on the educators they administer.

An example of meta-evaluation in educational administration follows on these assumptions, to illustrate the issue raised by this paper, not to provide definitive proof or even to stimulate argument about the example used.

A SCHOOL REVIEW - WHAT IT MEANT TO DIFFERENT PEOPLE INVOLVED

Near the end of Term 1, 1982, 'Country' High closed for a day to 'Review the Review'. Eight students, nine parents, 24 teachers, and five administrators reflected on the 1981 School Review. To collect (and set aside) residual attitudes and feelings about the events, an anonymous questionnaire was used. It was then possible for participants to examine the content of the Exernal Review Report much more objectively, and later, build a practical vision for 'Country' High. A second In Service Education day of collaborative action planning was based on this collective perspective.

The two days of facilitation were negotiated between the writer as process consultant, and the Deputy Principal, who acted on behalf of the Principal and the staff's Curriculum Development Committee. Very early in the contracting process, and repeatedly since, the writer's attention was drawn to the negative effects that 'the Review' was held to have had. If '... the major aim of school review is school improvement ...' (Ford,

1980b) then it might prove useful for educational administrators to learn of the experienced realities of those reviewed, and then reconsider the appropriateness of such processes.

The process of school review currently used in the Department of Education of Victoria is designed to have three linked phases; an internal school evaluation, a School Review Board visit and report, and a follow-up stage (Resource Book, 1980, 4). The intended outcomes are

> '... to assist in the process of school improvement by encouraging:
>
> (i) the clarification and strengthening of the school's education goals and objectives;
>
> (ii) improvement in the quality of the instructional program;
>
> (iii) more effective use of school facilities;
>
> (iv) development of professional skill, knowledge, and competence of the school staff; and
>
> (v) maximum coordination and development of school community effort towards the achievement of school goals and objectives'.
>
> (Ford, 1980a.3, and 1980b.2)

(These, in turn, become criteria for meta evaluation). Such an approach, of course, presumes that school improvement is a matter of developing the understandings that teachers have and the decisions they make, and thus to help them acquire different values and improve their classroom performance. It follows that to collect the views of those 'reviewed' is, in effect, to gain access to the existential reality of the process and its 'real' outcomes. The guidelines in the Resource Book (1980) deserve critical appraisal, but this meta-evaluation will only seek to clarify the meaning of what happened at 'Country' High, and thus inform the more general debate on the consequences of educational administrative action in schools, especially the 'I and We' issue of accountability.

## METHOD OF UNDERSTANDING

An initial decision was to set aside accustomed perceptual systems to allow the phenomena of 'being reviewed' to appear as itself (Denton,

1981:596). It was also a suspension of an assumption implicit in the design of the Departmental Review system - that schools (and social reality) are natural systems; that is, as organizations schools are real, independent of people, goal orientated, and instruments of order in society serving both society and the individual (Greenfield, 1975:64). It is not to adopt a Marxist posture, but instead to argue that to make sense of phenomena in schools, we might begin by accepting that schools (as organizations) are invented social reality; heavily dependent upon people and their goals for the meanings used to make sense, make decisions, and take actions which seem right and proper (Greenfield, 1973:557). In other words, to understand others' experience, we might begin with the questions: 'What is going on here?' and 'What does it mean?'

As noted above, the first step of data collection was to gather, with four open-response items, a retrospective view of the school review process, six months after the Review Board had visited.

The second stage of data collection was to test the validity of the accounts given by asking respondents to comment on the multiple perspectives represented in the summary presented below. The degree to which experience parallels the account is clarified below, but it is important to note the sample is not one where n = 46, but 46 universes of meaning, each having an n = 1.

WHAT HAPPENED BEFORE THE REVIEW TEAM VISITED AND HOW DID PEOPLE FEEL?

According to those who wrote it '... schools exist to serve the educational needs of children ...' (Resource Book, 1980 4). The eight students noted happenings before the visit which seem to point to other purposes. Three told how the school 'got cleaned up' and two recalled 'a special uniform effort'. Two indicated that 'nothing much happened' and although all eight had received prior notice of the visit (one

indicated a week's warning was given), they 'didn't take much notice at the time', and whilst noting 'that [although] knowing didn't worry me much - a lot of people's attitude changed'. This enigmatic statement contrasts with another student's statement to the effect that he/she was 'told about the Review Board, but most didn't understand'. But all students remembered being 'told to be polite for the Review Board'.

Above, the fifth intended outcome of the school review process was noted to be about community involvement. Of the nine parents present, seven had not been involved in the events before the Review week, one bluntly stating that he/she 'was not asked to be involved'. The ninth parent indicated how, in retrospect, she now doubted '... my ability to contribute as a school councillor'. For a parent to learn this, in view of the fifth intended outcome, is unfortunate.

All but one (absent) of the school's staff contributed their recollections and feelings. Twenty-one staff classified themselves as teachers, one as a student teacher, and two saw themselves as teacher/administrators. The senior mistress, the deputy principal, the principal and a departmental inspector were self-classified as administrators. The inspector present was not the school's contact inspector, but had been a Review Board member.

Six teachers (one quarter) were 'not here in 1981'. The remaining 18 teachers agree on certain aspects: 'there were many meetings', 'the workload was huge', 'a great deal was done outside school hours to produce the Internal Review'. The five positive views of the processes follow:

> 'Some of it honestly and constructively critical'
>
> 'Involved parties looked at the operation of the school as a whole'
>
> 'A time of soul searching, not only in your own particular area, but about the school as a whole. I felt it was most beneficial to me as a teacher'

'Critical self analysis was the best thing to come out of the whole review'

'The faculties analyzed objectives, aims, resources, facilities and funding. The exercise was worthwhile and constructive. It was an excellent opportunity to look at one's subject area(s) and make constructive criticisms and recommendations'.

The other 13 teachers' reflections were at best ambivalent, some cynical, most antagonistic and bitter. The four 'ambivalents' saw the preparatory phase in these terms:

'Felt nervous about the situation which generated a lot of ill-feeling, bitching and tension within staff relationships which doesn't usually exist. People were suspicious and unsure of the Inspection Issue - cope, accept, reject? - ground work helped alleviate this feeling. It still amounted to an inspection, but it was a relatively painless experience - we had some choice over who would be involved. The very intensive workload meant that the quality of teaching and staff morale suffered considerably'.

'Meetings adnauseum. Some were beneficial, some were time consuming and annoying. At least the faculties were forced to critically look at themselves and write it down. Some people tried to whitewash their roles, and to a certain degree succeeded, others were more honest and objective'.

'Some of the work directed towards making things look O.K. Process not helped by a lack of direction about intended achievements. Overall, in some areas some satisfaction, in others frustration/resignation'.

'Felt the school as being "improved" for the visit (rooms tidied, students asked to behave properly) and this was an unreal image of the school'.

The cynical and bitter comments far outnumber ambivalent and positive references. A representative sample follows:

'Much irrelevant and useless. Some important areas "looked around" or omitted'.

'Direction lacking, those organizing did not communicate goals and reasons sufficiently well - hence frustration as to what to do and why ... a good opportunity to open issues for action, but they were blocked, which led to frustration, impotence and a disinclination to work effectively'.

'Areas open to strong criticism should have been torn apart to some positive effect ... not gutsy enough in approach'.

'Busy, confused disbelief, "pie-in-the-sky"'.

'Continuous meetings, ... resentful ... drop in effectiveness'.

'Certain areas were not considered, i.e., senior mistress role, year level coordinator role ... lack of direction in tasks. All very late, mad rush to complete the Internal Report'.

'Many meetings outside class time - took precedence over actual running of the school'.

'Disillusioned ... most became hassled, all we wanted was for it to be over'.

The two teacher/administrators had a positive recollection of events, noting 'hard work - good within some faculties ... changes made even before the Review Board came'. They remembered the relief felt when 'the printing was accomplished' and the 'tremendous staff spirit [that] was generated'. One noted that 'most staff were fairly keyed up and expectant, [but] students didn't really seem to be capable of understanding what it was all about'.

Of the administrators, the school secretary could not recall being involved, and the deputy principal remembered that 'things were very hectic, workload huge, quite a few hassles. The senior mistress described her 'enthusiastic involvement from late April' and how she learned processes from guidelines, guests, and committee interaction. She felt commitment and her professional 'self esteem' grow with her participation in the 'professionally stimulating' process. The principal recalled 'a great deal of time in planning, stimulating, conferring, developing actions, organizing, ensuring unity of purpose and commitment'. His feelings ranged from 'hopeful, apprehensive, eager, unsure, generally confident, very pleased with general responses' to 'sometimes frustrated by events and challenges'. However, he too 'grew tired of innumerable discussions, miniconferences and so on - while maintaining the normal work system'. The visiting departmental inspector indicated he had not been involved in this preparatory phase but that the school's contact inspector had been deeply involved in all three phases.

It is very apparent that the sense people made of the preparatory events varied enormously, but it would be premature to conclude that the differences in participation account for this variance. This phase was subsequently held to have been the most valuable of all three, some involved held it to be the only phase of value.

WHAT HAPPENED DURING THE REVIEW WEEK, AND HOW DID PEOPLE FEEL?

The nine students reported that they were watched at work and asked questions by the Review Board members. Questions were about 'classes, subjects', 'the present situation and things we want'. The students 'didn't feel much' or 'didn't like it much', as 'some of the teachers were selling themselves - not allowing the Review team to talk to the students freely'.

Two parents enjoyed catering roles during the Review week, and three indicated how pleasant it had been to 'help in this very necessary review'. Of the four parents that participated, two noted expectations in terms of 'expert comparative opinion' and 'they were going to contribute to the school'. The other five parents were not involved, one again stating that 'I wasn't asked to be involved'.

Of the 18 teachers present at the Review week, only three expressed positive memories:

> 'The people I worked with were extremely helpful, the most valuable point was just talking to them and exchanging ideas'.
>
> 'Review briefs seemed good ... constructive'.
>
> A consultant ... took an outsider's objective view of the situation - and helped clarify objectives and problems that confronted each subject and faculty'.

The ambivalence many had was expressed in comments such as:

> 'Felt a bit on edge at having questions asked of me - many had obvious answers or had already been answered by our faculty'.
>
> 'Felt a bit "toey" at first but then felt that their visit was helpful'.

'On show, proud in some ways, false in others. Still felt it was all pie-in-the-sky'.

The major differences between recollections of the preparatory process and the Review week is the intensified feelings of distaste and anger. The following comments capture the feelings about Review week held by over two-thirds of the teachers:

'Members visited rooms during lessons under the guise of "getting the mood of the school" - it seemed like the inspection of old to me'.

'Greater disruption to the school programme than we were led to believe'.

'Very little happened. The external review was extremely superficial. Few of the reviewers were able to come to terms with the Internal Review Document - comments seemed limited to validation - [they] seemed more concerned with departmental policies'.

'Issues I'd hoped would be raised by the externals weren't covered or "whitewashed"'.

'I had this feeling of aggression toward the whole business because we were not really allowed to be ourselves by the administration'.

'Class visits - don't mind them - but they had an uncanny knack of picking your worst class, and speaking only to the low achiever'.

A sense of identification with and sympathy for the Review Board members was apparent in a few guarded comments: 'seemed astute but constrained by the presence of [the chairman]', 'kept mainly to themselves' and 'some worthwhile discussions and suggestions made'.

The two teacher/administrators' opinions had also shifted considerably, especially as the week wore on:

'It started off well - but a feeling became apparent, particularly among steering committee members that the board was not getting to the meat of the matter. One or two briefs were most satisfactorily dealt with. The majority were rubber stamps or irrelevant'.

The other interpreted the events as 'the politics of the Review process started to emerge ... I personally was very pleased with the way the week

went, but I kept getting negative response from some quarters of the staff'.

The administrators of the school describe the intense social and consultative processes used, and each recalled the events in somewhat different ways:

> 'Apprehensive about the presence of [the chairman] in school as Board leader ... overall confident about the success of the venture ... pleased with the atmosphere'.
>
> 'Extra pressure on all ... got on well together ... lot of information gained on both sides'.
>
> 'Extended hospitality and goodwill ... community marvellous ... some Board members, e.g., School Contact Inspector ... professionally stimulating, growing-type encounter ... some Board members made decisions without adequate (or any) discussion with people involved. I became apprehensive - a few people both on staff and Review Board had barrows to push ... I felt staff fragmentation, disillusionment ... the whole school tended to become restless towards the end of the week'.

The visiting inspector (ex-Review Board member)recalled events in these terms:

> 'Difficult in some cases to break the ice ... wanted to dig to highlight the issues, but did not want to pose a threat to staff in doing so, hence first couple of days spent 'feeling my way' ... by midweek warmed to staff and students ... appreciated job being done by staff ... conscious of making recommendations not criticisms (detrimental) ... appeared that much that was to be done had already been recommended as part of the internal review phase'.

WHAT EVENTS HAPPENED AFTER THE VISIT AND HOW DID PEOPLE FEEL?

The students indicated that 'general ideas' were reported to them at assemblies, one student was 'told ... that they were good'. Two parents expressed the hope that 'some of the recommendations can be put into effect' and others merely expressed relief that with the visit 'it was all over'.

Most significant to teachers and administrators was that six months passed before the External Review Report was available in the school. However, what happened in that waiting period was seen in many different ways:

'Nothing happened. Today should have happened in November. Writers of the Review Board expected this as did the staff - immense feeling of let down as momentum eroded, and we shared feelings of cynicsm'.

'Atmosphere of relief and then uncertainty ... achievements worth the hassles? We became particularly annoyed'.

'Felt quite relieved because midway through the review I was genuinely worried that the Review Board would 'can' the school and thereby undermine its community image'.

'People were keyed up, and then everything fell flat'.

'Our department wrote a submission for funding ... because the need had been identified and legitimized by a Review member'.

To summarise, it is as if expectations were raised high in many different ways by the visit, and then, as two staff members put it, there was then a 'feeling of void - nothing happening'. 'Review Week, then full stop' and 'staff [were left] wondering if the ordeal and conclusions warranted the preparation'. Understandably, some staff reacted bitterly - 'the Review team were all words (mainly echoing ours) and had no other authority (money in particular) ... it was disappointing and almost a waste of time'. The External Report did not find favour - 'it was not professionally developing as the Internal Review - even though much positive was written'. Three bitter comments indicated that they 'didn't appreciate the censorship of the report - felt it became a façade' and many had decided to put the exercise behind them. The principal, for example, expected the 'review of the review (the In Service days) to begin the process of implementation, to revitalize the staff'. As other senior staff put it, this post visit phase was one of 'anger and frustration' and 'it was difficult to get (or keep]) things relative to the Review "alive"'. The visiting inspector patently had doubts, and 'hoped that the principal and staff had found our visit worthwhile'.

It would be an erroneous conclusion to see the delay in feedback as the prime cause of the tragic drop in professional morale, and consequent

disengagement and cynicism. In the next section it becomes clear that the vast majority of the non-administrator staff had concluded that the overall exercise was professionally ineffective and partially fraudulent.

REFLECTIONS ON THE OVERALL REVIEW PROCESS BY THE REVIEWED

The students felt unable to answer, except one who indicated that 'a lot more contact with students would be better'. The nine parents wanted to reaffirm their faith in their school, and that the review might yet help. Their comments included these:

> 'Should lead to future planning to overcome deficiencies, vision should come from the internal review'.
>
> 'Hopefully, for teachers, school council and all that put in hours and hours (with time off children had from school) something will be achieved'.

One parent noted that 'some editing reduced the impact of the report'. Another recalled the way the first phase had 'stimulated a great deal of activity, teachers looking into teaching methods and directions, facilities and room organization ... encouraged people to think how the school meets community needs and futures'.

The staff new to the school in 1982 reflected the range of views held by staff, explicitly recognizing the resentment, disillusionment and lack of response associated with the overall exercise. All (but one) also held the internal review phase to be worthwhile, and that it could be the basis for yet-to-be achieved change.

The 18 'reviewed' staff and administrators confirmed the comparative value of the Internal Review phase, but the criticisms that follow constitute an evaluation of the reviewers' visit and their follow-up phases.

> 'The aims, processes and programme need clarification to avoid frustration and cynicism. Most helpful if the views and thoughts of outsiders are openly stated, not edited to a virtual whitewash'.
>
> 'It seems that individual change agents are in the long term more effective than institutionalized belly-button gazing'.

'Action while the iron was hot and before you took a new staff turnover - which makes for a new school'.

'Capital recommendations are useless without ... financial punch'.

'The visit now seems like a public-relations exercise due to the lack of follow-up'.

'Considering the cost of having ten-plus people as guests, accommodation, travel etc. results are essential'.

What suggestions did reviewed teachers have? Patently some thought visits should stop until an effective overall process of school improvement can be designed, but many offered less drastic ideas:

'Use the week for In-Service to work quickly on identified problems'.

'School and faculties ... [plan] ... their own mini-reviews'.

'One or two specialists analyze [internal] results ... [and] ... fewer members could be consistent, and develop an overall analysis of schooling in the state'.

'See us as we are ... [and] ... accept the unique atmosphere of the school'.

The degree to which professional expectations were engendered by, and subsequently devastated by the Review week and follow-up phases is apparent in this next stunning message:

'The multiple editing of views and reports by those in power and with vested interests in the outcome of the review ... [a list of internal and external administrators was given] ... left a toothless emasculated report which reinforced frustration and impotence'.

But how did the administrators view the exercise in retrospect?

'Things should have started happening soon after [the visit] ... but all sorts of hold-ups caused this long delay'.

'Definitely recommend it as a worthwhile experience ... be prepared for work ... and to accept criticism and grow from it, otherwise a distinct waste of time. Now there is a need to motivate action - needs strong push from the top - have to rejuvenate involvement'.

'Very positive benefit to the school. Brought school together in unity and purpose as never before. Big factor in general professional improvement and outlook of many ... very demanding, challenging, wearing, worthwhile'.

The visiting inspector asked to 'receive honest, constructive feedback ... as to the worth of the process, particularly the external review ... to help improve the process for other schools'. The views above might serve this purpose, in a novel way, and they confirm the need to raise the issue of administrators being held accountable for the processes they provide or use to facilitate school improvement.

## CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The account above has been confirmed as an accurate 'snapshot' of perceptions after feedback to all staff. It should be noted that the feedback led to other anticipated outcomes. For example, the principal - a deeply compassionate and sensitive educator - moved quickly to address a range of issues in very positive ways. In the view of the writer, it would be simplistic and serve no useful purpose to merely attribute blame. The data was about one in time. Of the administrators, it can be said that they entered into a process in good faith, and are all fine people. That is not the issue.

Instead, it is argued, we should seek to understand in more fundamental terms, what happened, what it meant, and then to appraise the processes being used in terms of 'realities', i.e., learn to meta evaluate.

The contributors have confirmed the account above as accurately representing (in some cases, divergent) perceptions of 'truth' and 'fact'. If to all practical intents and purposes in that school the account is true, then meta-evaluation is thus demonstrated as plausible, and justified on the assumptions given above. But what does it all mean?

Given the stated intended outcomes, the Review failed in most respects. Some groups of teachers clarified purposes, some resources were reviewed, and some team-building occurred in the first phase. But the Review failed to facilitate (in any lasting or fundamental sense) the

development of teaching, learning, administration or governance. Only some people's attitudes changed, mostly in short-term, counter-productive ways.

Teacher morale, involvement and expectations traced the pattern of a 'cargo cult' cycle, one feature of Victorian School Reviews first alluded to by McCullogh (1978). Students and parents appeared to have had their passive neutral acquiescence reinforced. The school administrators appear to have learnt some roles of review process facilitation, but emerged troubled by the unanticipated outcomes - which in turn, highlighted the ideological gap between the bureaucratic and educational value systems that people (with differentiated power) appear to hold to. The external Reviewers appear to be agents of an external apparatus of power and dominance, using myths and symbols to legitimize and reassert forms of control over people in schools.

Thus, this meta-evaluation suggests that the Review of this school was a ritual to maintain illusions of individual power at all levels. A teacher in 'Country' High can believe that behind his classroom door he has complete freedom. With colleagues and the school administrators, he can believe that they have constructed a 'shell' organization, within which they can get on with the business of education. Reviewers can believe the school has been 'held accountable' and that 'improvement' will follow. As Clegg (1979) argued, that such an '... illusion serves to mask the actual structures of power which are not signalled in their efforts, but whose effects become merely a further occasion for reasserting the hegemony of the ideological framework which enables and justifies these structures'. And as Galbraith (1974:223) pointed out, '... power which is based on belief is uniquely authoritarian; when fully effective, it excludes by its nature, the thought that would weaken its grasp'.

Returning to Einstein's insightful confession, and the major question posed and illustrated in this paper: it appears that such meta-evaluation of accountability as action is one way of making manifest the essence of such enterprise. Despite the methodological limitations inherent in such an exercise, it is argued that while there is ample cause for concern, there is markedly less concern for cause in the action of educational administrators.

To conclude, we might do well to dwell on the following questions:

a. What was it, that Einstein saw so clearly, that he had fled from?

b. What is the essence of selling oneself body and soul (say) to the 'science' of administration? and,

c. What are the appropriate 'I and We' processes and criteria for accountability (even formative evaluation) of educational administrators?

## Notes

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